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CODDLING IN ENGLISH

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A recent handbook which purports to teach teachers how to teach English composition in the high school has this statement:

It is well for the teacher to be on the lookout at all times for errors in spelling and punctuation and grammar, but he should direct his energies in theme criticism mainly to matters which the class is discussing at the time. Cold, unsympathetic criticism will increase a natural dislike for writing. Red ink should be used sparingly, unless carelessness or slovenliness is evident—never when the student is putting forth his best efforts. Composition should be a constructive and not a destructive process.

This extract is from the introduction to the work for the eighth grade. The same booklet says with regard to the work of the ninth grade:

It should be remembered, in the course of instructing the students, that if they have reached a reasonable standard of efficiency by the time they have graduated from the high school, the teacher has done wonders with them. Therefore, only glaring errors should be strenuously attacked in the first two years of the high-school course, special stress being laid on spelling, bad grammar, and hanging constructions. The finer points should be carefully approached, and taken up gradually.

To complete the quotations in a spirit of fairness, the standards of achievement as laid down for the last year of the high school are given:

By this time students are supposed to be practically free from grammatical errors; they are supposed to know how to punctuate reasonably well; how to construct clear and forceful sentences. For these reasons, in the fourth year emphasis should be placed upon the ability to think, to organize and develop material, to interpret and to appreciate.

It is a generally known fact that students just entering college are notably deficient in composition. If such directions as the foregoing are issued generally with regard to the teaching of high-school composition, does one have to seek far for the reason?

It seems an odd fact that students who have spent eleven or twelve years in the so-called study of English composition should not be able to write fairly good sentences, should not be able to punctuate properly, and should misuse the English grammar in a truly pitiable fashion. Yet such is the condition of about 50 per cent of them at a low estimate, as most college teachers of English can testify. One wonders that with all the reading of "classics" that the student has done in the high school he has not automatically absorbed some, at least, of the general principles of language construction.

Furthermore, under the necessity and stimulus of college conditions the student usually learns to write fairly well by the end of his Freshman year. What has been done with the eleven or twelve years preceding? It seems that we have come to the conclusion that what a student can learn in college he need not learn in the high school, and that it is all right for him to wait until he gets to college for his first real course in composition. But is this a reasonable conclusion, and is it one that the high schools themselves are willing to accept as the measure of their work in English composition?

From the statements contained in a number of high-school handbooks and outlines of courses from all over the country recently examined, it would seem that the aim of their courses is altogether different. Most of them have substantially the following statement with regard to their courses in composition: "The course in composition and literature is designed to give the graduate of the high school an acquaintance with the literature of the language and to enable him to express himself in clear and coherent idiomatic English, so that he can make himself readily understood in both writing and speaking." This is indeed a very laudable ambition, but it is just this expressing of himself so that he can be readily understood that the average student who comes to college cannot do, with any degree of ease and fluency at any rate.

Now, there seem to be just two assignable causes for such a condition: first, the high school is insincere in its statement of its standard and does not mean what it says; or, secondly, it has not the ability to accomplish the task it has set itself.

It would seem too harsh to accept the first hypothesis, and furthermore it is certain that the high schools are endeavoring sincerely and earnestly to keep up with their standards, and that no one deprecates more than do the high-school people the lack of ability in composition of the ordinary college Freshman. The other hypothesis, then, remains; namely, that for some reason which the high schools themselves cannot ascertain they are failing to accomplish the thing they are most earnestly striving to accomplish.

In all fairness it should be said that not all of the schools are so naïve with regard to the correction of errors in composition as is the bulletin quoted at the beginning of this paper. Many of them, beginning in most instances in the fourth grade, insist on the preparation of at least weekly themes. A number of them also insist that errors be carefully looked out for and corrected all along the line. Nevertheless, there is a class of them, quite numerous enough to give cause for alarm, that advise the treatment of errors in this same coddling fashion, for fear, forsooth, that teacher may hurt poor little Johnnie's feelings, or make poor little Sarah go home and tell mama and papa what a "nasty teacher" she has.

Well, a few hurts to Johnnie's feelings will not hurt Johnnie, and if little Sarah is the least bit of a wise little girl and has the least bit of a wise papa and mama she will come some day to bless that teacher's memory who corrected her errors, even if she was "putting forth her best efforts."

Johnnie will not always have to deal with a fond teacher who is afraid of hurting his feelings, nor will Sarah always have the cotton wool wrapped about her little body. Both of them will at some time have to face conditions quite different, and they had both better be glad to have a teacher who is earnest in her desire to see that they learn what they are supposed to learn, even though they do have to get it at the expense of a few tears. Furthermore, is not that why they are at school at all? Were they sent there to be allowed merely to do their best and to be patted on the back when they have done that?

Suppose we carry this sort of reasoning back to the day when Johnnie and Sarah entered school. They came into the room a bit recalcitrant, perhaps, and a bit frightened. Teacher set them a

task, and they went about it with all the eagerness of their young minds, endeavoring in their best way to do the task set. But they made mistakes, as they always will. Now, should teacher have said, "Johnnie and Sarah, you have done your best, and you need not try any more. Here is another task for you to do, and I know you will like it, for it is something new. All little children love to do new things. The way you do this will depend upon how well you did the other thing a while ago, but as a reward for your doing your best and trying so hard, I am not going to tell you what was wrong with the other, but I am going to give you a perfect mark and put your name at the top of the list, in pretty red chalk on the honor roll. See?" And the little ones go on, each of them trying to do his best, and teacher, for fear of discouraging them, is resolutely determined not to tell them what they have done wrong. After a bit, however, Johnnie and Sarah become more worldly-wise, and discover that teacher has many more in class who are also trying "to do their best." Why, they begin to reason, can we not do just a little bit less than our best? for teacher is so busy that she will never know. And so that teacher has implanted in their minds a wrong habit that, like all wrong habits, will take deep root and soon grow into a rank and stinking weed.

We all see how foolish such a procedure would be, and how very wrong, and certainly there is nobody who would in seriousness advise such a measure. But in what way is this unlike the method outlined in the pamphlet quoted from at the beginning of this article? The result is a habit implanted in the pupil that by the time he reaches college has grown to such proportions that he finds great difficulty in eradicating it. Can one for a moment think that a pupil will bless the memory of a teacher who allows him to do as he pleases merely because he is doing his best? Not a bit of it. Often students have come in perplexity, and almost in despair, to the writer and said: "If only I had been taught in the beginning to do this thing right. Instead of that I have been allowed to go as I pleased throughout my school course, and nobody has told me before that that was an error." Can one imagine a more inexcusable situation? Is there anything more pathetic than to have a student say: "I just can't learn to do that thing right. I have

been doing it wrong for so long that I forget every time. I know just as soon as you mention it what is the matter, but I have got the habit, and it is a mighty hard thing to break myself of it."

It is true enough that the grade teachers have many difficulties to contend with. It is also true that the high-school teacher has, as a rule, many more students and consequently many more papers to grade than does the college teacher. Besides, the college teacher is usually a specialist in his line, has nothing else but English to teach, and so learns automatically to find and correct many errors that take all the efforts of the conscious mind of the already weary and fagged secondary teacher. But the remedy for this condition is in the hands of the superintendents of schools who overload their teachers, of the boards of trustees who are niggardly in their appropriations, and of the people themselves who do not freely vote their taxes for the education of their children. Hence, there is no need to break Quixotic lances over this condition, for the remedy for it will come only in the course of a long time. Meanwhile, the secondary-school teacher must make the best of things as they are, and endeavor to better such conditions as can be bettered.

And there are many such. For example, it is inexcusable that a teacher should consciously allow herself to overlook errors, no matter by whom the advice may be given to do so. No teacher in any grade should ever assign an exercise in English, any part of the construction of which cannot be satisfactorily explained to the pupil. What can be explained to the pupil he can consciously imitate, and by drill he may become perfect in the application of the principle, so that it becomes a part of his mental habits and enters into his subconscious activities. This may seem a bold statement, but it will bear consideration.

When one compares, for instance, the papers received in Freshman English with the requirements in composition in the primary and grammar grades, as set forth by most of the schools, he wonders if there is much in the majority of these papers that the eighth-grade pupil is supposed to do better than it is done here. There are but two explanations for such a condition: either the student is not taught the composition required in the course of study, or else his teachers have failed to correct his mistakes as

he has made them. From the admission of most failing students it would seem that the latter is the case.

But someone says: "The schools have to undo the work of the home and of the home influence. We teach right form, but when the pupil goes home he hears poor language used and sees poor letters written, and is confronted on all sides with bad English. Thus all the work that we have done is torn down and is of no avail."

The answer to all such is simply this: If the schools cannot undo the uneducating influences at work in the home (and that they exist is not denied), then the schools are absolutely failing to do what they are planned for; and this arraignment, which comes from the mouths of school people themselves, is one of the worst that can be brought against them. It is an undeniable fact that where the uneducating influence is most at work, namely, in the homes of ignorance, the schools have the most influence. In these homes what "teacher" says is pretty likely to be taken for gospel. Nor is it any excuse that the teachers are overworked and so cannot do their duty in the tiring task of grading papers. Nor, certainly, can we bring the charge that our teachers are uneducated.

It must be then that the teacher "spares the red ink too much" and thus spoils the child's chances for an education. She does it either because she is too lazy to do otherwise or because she has been told that it is the wrong kind of pedagogy not to do so. It is unquestionably and unequivocally the wrong kind of pedagogy to do so, and the sooner this lesson is learned the better. Surely it would not be the right kind of pedagogy to "spare the red ink" in arithmetic. Why should it be any different in English? For whatever may be thought to the contrary, the rules of English composition are quite as logical and quite as easily explained, and consequently imitated, as are the rules of mathematics.